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SUBJECT: SVETLANA MEDVEDEVA STEPS INTO THE SPOTLIGHT

11. (SBU) Summary: Since Dmitriy Medvedev's election to the post of president, a degree of uncertainty permeated the press as the public tried to figure out what role his wife, Svetlana Medvedeva, would play in the new administration. The role of First Ladies in Russia and the Soviet Union has often been a contentious issue. Some, such as Raisa Gorbacheva, were quite active and frequently seen in public, while others, such as Lyudmila Putina, were more reclusive and less involved in state affairs. Due to her recent involvement in the planning for the "Day of Family, Love, and Fidelity," many have compared Medvedeva to Gorbacheva, but that analogy seems less apt; instead she seems to be altogether a new type of Russian First Lady, one who is more active than Putina, but -- for now -- less flashy than Gorbacheva.

Previous First Ladies

12. (SBU) In a May 14 article, Georgiy Zotov of the Moscow daily Argumenty i Fakty attempted to compare the roles of several Russian first ladies to set-up a context for Medvedeva's recent activities. While Naina Khrushcheva did travel with her husband to the U.S., she was not involved in his decision making. Viktoriya Brezhneva was not involved in her husband's public life. Raisa Gorbacheva was perhaps the most controversial; the public saw her as being overly active and her stylish dress provoked much criticism as the Soviet Union teetered economically. Yet Zotov asserted that Mikhail Gorbachev would not make any decisions without first consulting her. Naina Yeltsina always traveled with her husband but spent her time smoothing his increasingly erratic edges, while devoting her many energies to philanthropy. Then there was Lyudmila Putina, the least active publicly of all First Ladies. Putina typically appeared at those events required by protocol and avoided making public statements. Over time, as rumors started over her health and the extramarital pursuits of her husband, she became increasingly remote, frumpy (to a condescending Moscow elite), and distant from public life. She even chose not to accompany her husband to Sochi for his farewell meeting as president with President Bush.

Svetlana Medvedeva as First Lady

13. (SBU) Svetlana Medvedeva does not fit neatly into any of these roles. After graduating from the Leningrad Financial-Economic Institute in 1987, she worked for several years but gave up her job at the behest of her husband when their son was born in 1995. Yet many have characterized her as the driving force both in the family and in Dmitriy Medvedev's career. Sources close to the couple describe Medvedeva as charismatic, and as having opened up doors for her husband, then a non-important law school professor in the early 90's when they lived in St. Petersburg. Recently, she has worked almost exclusively on a variety of cultural and philanthropic initiatives and has a strong connection with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Some of her activities

include the Festival of Russian Art and the Council for the Spiritual-Moral Culture of the Rising Generation of Russia that was founded by Aleksey II.

Criticisms of Medvedeva

14. (SBU) Few have directly criticized Medvedeva in the media -- a taboo set by Putin as president -- most simply have noted her previous social habits. When the couple moved to Moscow as Medvedev's governmental career took off in the mid-1990's, Medvedeva was known to frequent elite parties, fashion shows, and the circles of high society. Many have noted her penchant for high fashion, just like Gorbacheva, which is why the two are often compared. However, on becoming First Lady, Medvedeva took a half-step back from public view, most likely once again at Medvedev's behest. She and the Kremlin seem cognizant of the attention that is being placed on her and are trying to find a balance between the reclusiveness of Putina and the perceived ostentatiousness of Gorbacheva. Television journalist and political analyst Nikolay Svanidze, author of a much delayed Medvedev biography, attributed his inability to interview Medvedeva in person as "over cautiousness" by Medvedev's handlers, fearful of inciting public opinion against an "overly ambitious" Kremlin spouse.

15. (SBU) Most recently, Medvedeva took the national stage with planning for the new Russian holiday, the "Day of Family, Love, and Fidelity." Medvedeva was at the forefront of this project's spiritual and moral realm because of her links with the ROC. The holiday was celebrated on July 8

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because, according to the Orthodox Church's calendar, this is the holy day for the patron saints of families. According to a Russian legend, a Ryazan peasant's daughter named Fevroniy cured a prince Peter from Murom, who then married her against the wishes of his family. They lived a long and happy life together, died within hours of each other, and in 1547, were canonized. While festivals have been held in Murom on this date for centuries to celebrate the two saints, some political observers noted to us the irony of this childless couple being chosen to headline Russia's pro-family message. While discussing the holiday with the media, Medvedeva summed up her role in the initiative, saying "A woman should by her nature strive for humility. Her mission is to keep peace and love in the family. Of course, today's couples are more inclined to a balanced relationship."

16. (SBU) While there has been no direct criticism of Medvedeva and this recent family-based initiative, the government's policies towards the demographic problem continue to be criticized for not effectively addressing the political, cultural, and economic causes of the problem. Olga Vorobyeva, chair of Social Statistics and Demography at Russian State Social University, said that initiatives addressing the demographic problem need a two-pronged approach, improving family-life values and the public mentality. She also cited housing problems and access to education as contributing factors. Mikhail Nikolayev, Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council, said that the economic problems of families are not being adequately addressed by the government. Nikolayev also stressed the need for spiritual and moral education.

Comment

17. (SBU) As president, Medvedev has said that he wants Russians to be optimistic about their country's future, and Medvedeva has carefully chosen to spearhead an issue that clearly conforms to his priorities. While she took an active role in planning the "Day of Family, Love, and Fidelity," she has been careful not to attract too much attention to herself. Despite Medvedeva's fascination with high fashion,

she -- or her handlers -- has made an apparent conscious decision to avoid unflattering references to Gorbacheva; instead she has chosen to chart her own path, publicly engaging in philanthropy and work with the ROC, while purportedly exerting influence on Medvedev behind the scenes.

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